Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century

Regenia Gagnier, The Geopolitics of Beauty. *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 34 (2023) <https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.8337>

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The Geopolitics of Beauty

Regenia Gagnier

Building on eighteenth-century philosophical traditions, Victorian aesthetics were often posed as an antidote to the vicissitudes of the Industrial Revolution and the political and economic demands of the marketplace, and in most cultures undergoing modernization the Beautiful has often functioned in opposition to the forces of power and instrumentality and their corrosive effects on social life. Readers of *19* will be familiar with the Victorian environment — the workhouses, the poverty, the invention and technology, the urbanization, the Empire. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Islamic world saw the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the effects of European colonization, and modernizing forces in China led to the greatest rejection of a 3000-year-old tradition in world history. This Forum contribution compares Western, Islamic, and Chinese aesthetics. My argument is that since the nineteenth century, modern aesthetics have typically functioned dialectically against the constraints of scarcity, exploitation, and tyranny, and that within them Nature and the natural world play a particularly valuable role, one that is threatened today in the market failure of global warming and unsustainability.

The Beautiful is a symbol of the morally Good. — Kant
Indeed God is beautiful and He loves beauty. — Hadith

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Beauty in the Western tradition

In the Western tradition,[2] aesthetics has historically been the philosophy of the senses and sense perception, feeling, and emotion, as distinguished from that of cognition.[3] Its two main categories are the Beautiful and the Sublime, and it begins with Plato. The Greek *to kalon* refers equally to the kinds of things we would naturally call beautiful and to those we would call good, such as human actions or traits. In Plato and Plotinus,

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[1] I am grateful for comments on an earlier draft by Amina Yaqin and Asma Char (and for my original reading list for Beauty in Islam), Yue Zhuang and Ting Guo (Beauty in the Chinese aesthetic tradition), and Gabe Dupré (generally).

[2] This brief account of Western aesthetics is developed fully in my *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), which deals with production, reproduction, and pleasure in Victorian aesthetics and economics and the turn from the substantive aesthetics of the self-styled political economists of art to the preoccupation with the formal aspects of art and literature that came with physiological aesthetics at the end of the nineteenth century. Ethical aesthetics developed with industrialism and were concerned with the creation of self-regulating subjects and autonomous works; aesthetics of production were concerned with producers or creators and the conditions of creativity and production; aesthetics of taste or consumption, often with a physiological base, became dominant by the end of the nineteenth century largely through the ascent of psychology and academic institutions. Aesthetics of evaluation, best evoked today under the name of Matthew Arnold, were historically linked with the idea of national cultures and races. In that book I also explored moments when aesthetic knowledge has provided alternatives to the forces of mechanization, commodification, and brutalization.

[3] Our contemporary cognitive psychology would be less dualistic, no longer so clearly dividing affect from cognition or rationality in such theories as embodied cognition, extended mind, enactivism, and so forth.

beauty can either be naturally manifest or normatively sought, a duality that we also see in Islamic and Chinese aesthetics.

Just as nineteenth-century economics derived from broad and practical perceptions of people as producers/creators, labourers, and consumers, or creatures of taste and pleasure, so did aesthetics derive from these same perceptions. That is, the aesthetics of market society developed concurrently with the economics. J. S. Mill was not simply an eloquent theorist of liberalism, he was a practising politician, an MP for Westminster. In Mill's inaugural address to the University of St Andrews (1867), the topic of which was the content and purpose of a university education, Mill proposed science, ethics, and aesthetics, or the true, the good, and the beautiful. He specifically defined aesthetics as the education of the feelings through the culture of poetry and art. Mill claimed that commercial money-getting caused Britain, unlike Europe, to undervalue the arts. It was the British character to be moral in small things but to lack a noble purpose and a larger vision. An aesthetic education was needed that would inspire exalted feelings and the kind of idealism that would lift the British towards richer lives and a more harmonious whole than the business of getting on had to that point allowed. The function of aesthetics was to provide aesthetic feeling to soothe the mind and to harmonize humankind's multiform needs and capacities as they became increasingly subjected to the demands of the marketplace.

In the most famous statement in Western aesthetic philosophy, *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant refers the Beautiful to the Good. The moral good consists in acting autonomously, as one ought, rather than heteronomously, from desire, emotion, or self-interest. This freedom to act autonomously can only be achieved by reason, but it can be prefigured by the feeling of freedom from desire or self-interest that we get when we perceive the beautiful object. When we perceive the beautiful object, which in Kant is a natural object theoretically accessible to all rather than a person or work of art, which, Kant says, may give rise to an element of ego or possessiveness, the distinction between our perception and our concept creates an excess, a free play of imagination, that prefigures moral freedom or freedom from desire and self-interest. I have no desire to possess the sunset or song of a bird for there is enough of it for all, but I share with all the wonder of beholding it. The free play of imagination prefigures the reconciliation between individual and social life that the moral good entails: that is, the categorical imperative to act according to duty rather than according to desire or self-interest, or to act in such a way that your actions can be the basis for universal action. In Kant's anthropology making a man of taste falls short of making a morally good man, but the effort he makes in society to please others prepares him for morality. This taste for freedom is thus notoriously a form of discipline, a freedom from selfish desires. A

Kantian judgement of taste is neither simply subjective, relating to the consumer, nor objective, relating to the object. It is a relationship between subject and object through the harmonious workings of the faculties.

Kant distinguished the Beautiful's dulcet effects from the Sublime's initial effacement of the self or ego. In Edmund Burke's classic distinction between the Sublime (or the Great) and the Beautiful of 1757, the Beautiful has a function in countering the sublime forces of power:

> Sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small; beauty should be smooth, and polished; the great, rugged and negligent; beauty should shun the right line, yet deviate from it insensibly; the great in many cases loves the right line, and when it deviates, it often makes a strong deviation; beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy; beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even massive. They are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure [...] There is a wide difference between admiration and love. The sublime, which is the cause of the former, always dwells on great objects, and terrible; the [beautiful] on small ones, and pleasing. We submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us. (Quoted in Gagnier, pp. 37–38)

Traces of the Beautiful and Sublime pervade popular literature of the period. In Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854–55), itself a classic of industrial or social problem fiction, the aesthetic categories were unconsciously but indelibly mapped on to gender, political economy, and even geography. Margaret Hale, the heroine from the South, is described with the standard aesthetic adjectives corresponding to the Beautiful and is more preoccupied with pleasure than with pain or labour. She exists to love and be loved, and the epithets that describe her might have been transferred from her porcelain teacups: 'light-coloured', 'pink', 'round', 'ivory', 'pretty', 'noiseless'. In the next passage, the northern manufacturing entrepreneur Mr Thornton is contrasted as the Sublime, not only to Margaret as the Beautiful but also to her effeminate southern father Mr Hale, a tutor. Mr Hale's face and figure are 'slight', 'soft and waving', 'undulating', 'trembling', 'fluctuating', 'arched', 'languid', 'feminine', and 'dreamy'. Thornton, on the other hand, through Margaret's eyes, is described in terms of the Sublime: 'straight', 'unpleasantly sharp', 'penetrating', 'lines carved in marble', 'severe and resolved', 'ready to do and dare everything' (Gagnier, p. 38).

Burke famously said of our respective reactions to the Sublime and the Beautiful that we respond naturally to the Beautiful in the form of the small, the smooth, the

curvilinear, the delicate, and the bright, and we admire the Sublime in the form of the vast, the rugged, the jagged, the solid and massive, and the dark. Erasmus Darwin perceived the associative basis of the Beautiful when he named it a characteristic of beauty to be an object of love: we love the smooth, the soft, and the warm because we were once nourished thence. His grandson Charles later theorized the sense of beauty in relation to sexual selection. In the Western tradition, aesthetics was a counter to the competitive individualism of market society.

Beauty in Islam

In Arabic *jamāl* and *husn* are often translated as good, fine, beautiful. If aesthetics begins with Plato and Aristotle, since the (Western) Middle Ages (roughly contemporary with a 'Golden Age' of Islam) Muslim thinkers have discussed beauty (goodness, symmetry, proportion) and its opposite ugliness (immorality, disproportion, disorder) also as both a philosophy of experience and an ethical philosophy, always going back to the beauty of God and His creation. The Hadith says, 'Indeed God is beautiful and He loves beauty.' If we are to achieve spiritual completeness, we are duty-bound to feel wonder at the natural world, we must take pleasure in birdsong as an expression of God's nature (eleventh-century theologian Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī's example). Among the philosophers, the dogmatic theologians, and the Sufis there are common themes that will delight modern aficionados of Hegel and the Gaze. God was alone with His splendour, yet even He wanted recognition. So He created others to recognize Him. In the Hadith God says 'I was a Hidden Treasure and I loved to be recognized. So I created the creatures so that I may be recognized.' 'Beauty is the origin and the end of human existence. If human beings live this life beautifully, their beauty will be the means whereby they return joyfully to their beautiful God.'[4] The prophets are the most beautiful class of human beings, and Muhammad (PBUH) is the most beautiful of them all as a mirror of God.

Preceding Kant and Burke, the dogmatic theologians saw in God both beauty and majesty (Burke's Great, Kant's Sublime). When we encounter God's mercy, gentleness, and beauty, we react with attraction and love. When faced with God's wrath, severity, and majesty, we experience alienation and sorrow. Beauty (*jamāl*) is, with Majesty (*jalāl*), one of God's two faces. The beautiful soul seeks the one and sorrows in the other.[5]

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[4] Kazuyo Murata, *Beauty in Sufism: The Teachings of Rūzbihān Baqlī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017), p. 128.

[5] See Valerie Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture* (London: Tauris, 2001); and Sophia Vasalou, *Al-Ghazālī and the Idea of Moral Beauty* (London: Routledge, 2021).

A nice example of how a contemporary works with Islamic ideas of beauty is Khaled Abou El Fadl's *The Search for Beauty in Islam: A Conference of the Books*. Abou El Fadl is a Muslim jurist, human rights lawyer, and UCLA law professor. His book is a meditative dialogue between classical Islam and the present, taking 'full account of the ugliness that often plagues Muslim realities, it is through the process of engaging those unseemly realities that the search for beauty takes place'.[6] Abou El Fadl cites the Qur'an and Hadiths:

> The height of beauty is God. (p. 9)
>
> Beauty is a universal concept, a unifying force, and source of hope for a better future. (p. 15)
>
> Islamic message began with a single book, The Qur'an — a book of remarkable moral vision and beauty. (p. 19)

He explains that Shari'a is the process, methodology, and normative values of Islam, at the core of which is the search 'for God's inexhaustible beauty and the beauty of God's creation' (p. 20). In Chapter 32, 'On Being in Love', Beauty must lead you to God, not consume as a craving. In Chapter 33, a lecture on the Ugly, 'a life of morality, reason, and compassion is so pre-eminently beautiful, while a life plagued by opportunism, despotism, and whimsy is invariably ugly' (p. 106). He argues that

> Muslim connections to the epistemology, processes, and products of their intellect and heritage have been severed in the modern age and, in my opinion, they are the worse off for it. It is not that this intellectual heritage was ideal or free of problems, but that its ethical and moral potential is far superior to anything that replaced it. (p. 19)

Abou El Fadl argues for interpreting the Qur'an according to our times, respecting it 'too much to imprison it in a memorial of shrines constructed from the derangements of our fears' (p. 206). Our fears here are the fears of Muslim men who have become disoriented by a history of colonization. In chapters on 'Colonizing Women' and 'Women as a Colony', he says that because Muslim men were humiliated, exploited, and dominated, 'in the same fashion that the abused becomes an abuser, the colonized became the colonizer, and we [Muslim men] displaced our loss of masculinity, pride, and dignity upon our women, and made women a subjected colony' (p. 185). On asking, why the hijab, why should women cover their beauty?, Abou El Fadl answers, because

[6] Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Search for Beauty in Islam: A Conference of the Books* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), p. 8.

men are liable to temptation, 'because men are weak, women were commanded to cover' (p. 106). Against accusations from some fellow Muslims that he 'is just a Westernized Uncle Tom trying to gratify the CIA' (p. 206), Abou El Fadl goes about his exegesis of beauty in Islam. Like the Persian/Urdu poet and innovator Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), Abou El Fadl sees the Qur'an as surviving from tradition through modernity, and the Beautiful as central to it, as a way of life.[7]

Beauty in the Chinese aesthetic tradition

In the Qur'an the angel Gabriel appeared to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and asked him about the religion he was teaching. It had three dimensions: *islam* (submission), *iman* (faith), and *ihsan* (doing what is beautiful, or worshipping God as if you see Him and He sees you). In Li Zehou's classic *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* (*Huaxia meixue*), Li cites Confucius's advice to Zai Wo, 'Would you feel at ease? [...] If you really feel at ease, then do it', as the root of all political ethics and ideological consciousness, combining Confucius with Daoism, the verse teachings of Qu Yuan, and Chan Buddhism, all founded on a certain psychologism about the good life.[8] Confucianism never established a supramoral religion, but only a supramoral aesthetics, no divine but only a human psychological-emotional way of acting, no salvation but only a consolation for inevitable human sorrow in the moulding of the emotions. Similar to the Sufis and Islamic philosophers who transculturated Plato and the Neoplatonists, from Confucius through the modern period China absorbed and sinicized external influences, what Li calls 'sedimentation' (*jidian*).

For Confucius aesthetics was the 'art of living', of governance and self-governing. The Confucian tradition was rooted in sociality and mutual responsibility. It was influenced by Daoism, as in Zhuangzi, which was rooted in Nature and spiritual freedom, and evolved into an aesthetic realm (Wang Guowei's *jingjie*) or the revelation of life through the relationship between feeling and scene or environment. Classical Chinese aesthetics were about the attunement of the individual to the Dao (the natural course of things), or Nature (see the little humans in natural scenes on the classic scrolls) with the goal of moulding 'life-affirming' emotions, perhaps small happinesses in the face of large miseries. Fitness of individual to environment does not convey the metaphysical/moral/emotional/aesthetic qualities that are intrinsic to our natural surroundings, which are often referred to by Chinese words such as *shanshui* (mountains and rivers) and *tiandi* (heaven and earth). The moulding of emotions towards a feeling at ease,

[7] See Javed Majeed, *Muhammad Iqbal: Islam, Aesthetics and Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 2009).

[8] Li Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, trans. by Maija Bell Samei (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), p. 220.

or exalted equanimity, is a step towards achieving this attunement, or being in union with the Dao/Nature. Classical Chinese aesthetics were not about individual feelings or emotions for their own sake, and they were not 'sin-oriented', as in monotheistic religions like Christianity and Islam. Their preference is for moderation, holism, a sensuous psychology of feeling at ease: 'Chinese aesthetics submits realism to beauty and excludes unrestrained desire, instinctive impulses, intense emotion … purgative distress … any objectionable emotional form (or art) that serves up the ugly, weird, evil, and so on' (Li, p. xvii).

In his final chapter, 'Towards Modernity', Li writes of the transformation of classical aesthetics under the forces of modernization. By the late Tang and Five Dynasties (618–979 CE), philosophers saw

> sensual debauchery, instinctive outbursts, and the sudden outpouring of long-suppressed subconscious desire — these are the stuff of this new modern trend […]. Their open pursuit of the interesting, coincidental, shallow, odd, vulgar, romantic, humorous, shocking, deviant, and unexpected takes them quite a distance away from the traditional poetic ideal of 'gentleness and sincerity' and the Confucian standard of moral and ethical instruction. (p. 202)

By the middle of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 CE), desire (*yu*) emerged with expressions of sexual love, explicit sexual scenes, and the development of urban consumerism. Philosophers began to ask, does principle or feeling come first? Reason or passion? Is the social the aesthetic realm, or the individual as an instinctive, sensuous anomaly? Confucian aesthetics had aimed at emotional stability (feeling at ease) over a lifetime rather than merely good/pleasurable instantaneous emotions, and something like a group or collective psychology.

In this new, modern aesthetic, the individual becomes an unrepeatable, irreplaceable, unique sensuous life. Art and aesthetics are significant in and of themselves rather than as 'vehicles of The Way' (p. 196). From 1898 and the Hundred Days' Reform, modern Western thought entered China in force, and Schopenhauer's negative, Buddhist-inspired philosophy of pessimism met with Kant's positive philosophy of Beauty, both playing their part in sinicized aesthetic sedimentation. In the popular domain, as in Western culture, whole industries have made fortunes representing species of the ugly: crime, shock, horror, the angry. Li's book ends with the 1920s, when art began to serve the revolution, citing the influential Russian thinker Chernyshevsky's 'art is life'. As the revolution against Confucianism began its long march, Confucianism remained in the form of art for the state, with its emphasis on the good (beautiful) society.

Conclusion/Provocation

So what? What might we conclude about cross-cultural study of beauty and the Beautiful? Even while this short piece only takes three examples, and we would welcome more comparisons, say, with multiple African and Hindu or Indigenous conceptions, within the three here beauty has historically had a moral dimension, even to the point of not being separable from the good. Further, the Beautiful in two cases is contrasted with the Sublime, forms of nurturing contrasted with the forces of power and domination. In these cases beauty is also contrasted with the ugly, rash, disproportionate, imbalanced. And perhaps most urgently, in all three discourses Nature and our natural environment have a special relation to humankind in a beautiful harmony: without the beautiful aspects of Nature, the Beautiful in humankind is inert, unignited. This perception is urgent because at our moment Nature and the natural world are the site of the greatest market failure in world history. Given what we might call this elevated discourse about beauty, we might begin to discuss the thinning out of the concept in, say, commodity culture, which replaces beauty with glamour. As with other historical virtues, such as freedom, we seem to be caught in loops of the ugly, trivial, partial. Free speech is deemed to mean anything that anyone wants to post on the internet, whereas for Mill in the *locus classicus* of free speech, *On Liberty* (1859), free speech was the speech of a free human being, with all the material and epiphenomenal implications that that entailed, and it was specifically protected so that we would be able to speak truth — yes, Truth — to power. We might consider what it would mean for a human to be truly free, to be able to weigh fully accounted alternatives, to make a considered decision, and to act on it. We might consider what it would mean for us to have truly beautiful lives, relations, governance, societies, worlds.